

Embracing and Healing Disenfranchised Seekers:
Birthing a Church for the Next Generation

By

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ABSTRACT

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Separation from organized religion happens in a variety of ways. People can be removed from the group by consensus, by the leadership or on their own volition. Often these separations are the result of negative experiences. In many cases, these separations are self-imposed and it may be years before people find their way back to a faith community.

These separations may leave many seeking fulfillment for their faith needs, but to no positive end. There is often an encounter for many individuals that results in people being disenfranchised with their faith experience. In some cases the victims present many of the same issues as victims of child abuse or domestic violence.

This project engaged a small group of disenfranchised persons of faith in a healing process. The participants came from a variety of faith traditions. The result of the project has been a process of healing for the participants and the unexpected formation of a church with an internet based ministry as well.

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To my mother Evelyn H. Bailey. This is your result. You have been whispering every since you left. Most of your whispers are reflected here. Thank you and God bless you.

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CHAPTER 1

HISTORY OF UNITY

Unity is classified as a “New Thought” church. It came into being during a time when there were a number of religious ‘new thinkers’ coming on the scene. Many of the same players crossed the lines of demarcation between the different approaches when there were common elements to be found in the work. Some of the more popular names of that era are Mary Baker Eddy (Religious Science), H. Emilie Cady (Unity), and Earnest Holmes (Science of Mind). The one common element for all of these branches within the New Thought movement is that they all are based on metaphysics and ontology – or the science of being.

The history of the Unity movement can be traced back to the Charles and Myrtle Fillmore. Charles and Myrtle Fillmore met in Dennison, Texas and married in Clinton, Missouri on March 29, 1881. They found their way to Lee's Summit, Missouri. This is where they established the Unity School of Christianity. To this day the school occupies acres of lovely grounds that make up the campus.

Charles became known as an American mystic out of his work with metaphysics. This is the work that led to his huge popularity. He was especially known for his metaphysical interpretations of the Bible.

Charles and Myrtle Fillmore deeply believed in the power of prayer. They were committed to demonstrating how prayer makes a difference in life and can provide positive means of healing. It was through demonstrations of healing from Myrtle that

dramatically contributed to the popularity of their work. It is reported that Myrtle was afflicted with polio and other diseases. Through deep commitment to prayer her conditions were healed. This created a tremendous following for the Fillmore's.

It was never Charles Fillmore's intention to create a church. His vision was to simply have Bible study groups in people's homes and living rooms. It was the implementation and fulfillment of this vision that added to the success and fame of Charles and Myrtle. It was in this context that the Unity School of Christianity was formed.

Over the years the Unity movement has grown and declined like many other religious movements. Also, like many other movements, Unity has its share of variations and inconsistencies in the way in which individual churches take shape and form. It is the case with most denominations or faith traditions that the greatest desire by its corporate leadership is to have their franchise units reflect consistency. The more inconsistent the franchise units are, the more troubling it is for the corporate headquarters.

In looking at the Unity movement today, they have mega-churches in places like Atlanta, Georgia and small struggling congregations like the one in Bridgeport, Connecticut. This project comes out of an experience with Bridgeport Unity. It was a series of events, with a troubling encounter that led to a group choosing to separate as the result of less than positive experiences. Ultimately, the unanticipated outcome of forming a church with the primary purpose of healing wounded seekers has become the mission.

This project not only looks at the negative impact on those wounded seekers, there is also an exploration of how to heal those who were wounded in their journey towards seeking a relationship with God. For many it is difficult at best to even begin to

try to restore a relationship with a higher power that has been lost. The challenge is to restore a relationship when human beings destroyed the relationship. These are people who may be operating without some sensitivity to the impact of their actions. The tragedy is that there are so many wounded seekers in the world who are left with little or no hope for restoring or establishing a relationship with God.

Through this project opportunities for healing have been established and implemented. The path toward healing never ends. The work along that path is a life long process. The goal of this project is to establish a meaningful interruption in the pain of wounded seekers and at the same time institute powerful methods of healing that sustain the true meaning of all religions and that is essentially to have a closer relationship with God or a higher power if that is how one chooses to know God.

HISTORY OF BRIDGEPORT UNITY

Unity in Bridgeport, Connecticut has been in existence for well over 40 years. The current pastor has been the spiritual leader there for most of those years. Her background is not clear at all in terms of formal education and training. Her ordination is by what Unity calls, "ordination by exception." Essentially that means that an exception has been made to include this person as an ordained minister. In many instances it is very difficult to achieve this distinction.

In talking to the pastor, she let me know that her ordination was not a simple process. She actually traveled to Unity Village several times before she was approved to be ordained. A testament to her commitment is reflected in what she went through resulting in her being ordained.

During the time of her tenure there were many ups and downs. There was a point in time where the congregation was quite large. The numbers in attendance were well over 200 and given the size of the sanctuary, those numbers required two services. Just a point of reference for perspective, for that congregation, those numbers are large. Additionally, there was a large youth program. And needless to say, there was a choir as well.

The church grounds are quite beautiful. To be located in an urban center and have the surroundings that it does is a gift. The church is located on a corner lot set very far back from the street. The building itself dates back to the 1950s. There is a lovely wall made of fieldstones, waist high, that covers one side of the property facing Brewster Street, which is primarily filled with other churches. The other part of the property is open to Bartram Street that is totally residential. The grounds are fairly well-kept and filled with a few trees, flowers and paved walkways.

Inside the church itself there is a sanctuary that seats roughly 100 people. There is simply a lectern where an altar must have been at some time. A five-foot tall pedestal is off to one side with a statue of the Blessed Mother standing with no clear indication of the relevance. As far as Unity is concerned, this is not one of the icons that are a part of their protocol. This is one reflection of the lack of corporate influence. The walls of the sanctuary are relatively bare and the windows have no coverings in the way of stained glass although there are slat mini-blinds. Other than that, there is a large portrait of a laughing Jesus leaning up against the lectern facing the congregation. These symbols have no rhyme or reason as to their significance. In most Unity churches one will find the often-used symbol of a winged globe. According to Charles Fillmore, “The “winged

globe,” on the Unity cover design, symbolizes mind consciousness of its spiritual origin and power. It originated as a symbol of the perfect soul, in Chaldean and Egyptian occultism. It emblemized the soul in its flight back to the Supreme.”¹

There is a kitchen on the same floor off of the sanctuary with a stove, sink and cabinets all around. The kitchen has clearly not been used as a kitchen for easily five years or more. The need for this space to be used or at least cleaned is quite evident. No attention has been rendered to this area for a very long time.

The space that is available for meetings and youth programs is quite large. It’s about half the size of the sanctuary, in an “L” shape, and has a great number of supplies, tables, and chairs all unused. When you look at the room in that space it’s easy to say that this space once supported lively activities. There is a haunting presence that becomes very clear when you’re standing in that space. It’s almost as if a great number of people in the middle of a busy activity had to suddenly leave. It is now a very sad space. Resources, tools, and toys that were clearly intended for the joy of children are sadly left untouched. This space now goes totally unused and that is a sad thing to see.

On any given Sunday there may be a half dozen people in attendance at most. Of those who attend, if asked, they will tell you that they are there out of obligation or simply habit. It’s my guess that the “obligation” comes out of the guilt messages presented by the Minister. It is with a heavy heart that such an observation is made. This observation is objective and has been shared by many a visitor who may have come once or twice and made it very clear that there was nothing nurturing that would have them

¹ Charles Fillmore, Unity Magazine, Volume 36, Unity Tract Society, Kansas City, MO, 1912.

return. This objective feedback derived from visitors has always been reported or shared and never acted upon in a way to make a difference for those seekers.

This observation goes even further to include many former members who have had less than positive experiences and have chosen to move on. The choice to move on for this writer was made easier when the minister chose to attack rather than support the growth of her church. Initially it was a desire to interrupt or change the stories of the past that said that this church was destined to have a negative future because the pastor was so negative. It is unfortunate that that tide could not be changed. Instead all of these events led to the formation of a new church. That is the good news that was derived from the circumstances.

In an article by David Henke entitled *Spiritual Abuse*², he cites many of the circumstances that exist in Bridgeport Unity Church. This particular church is simply an example or icon for many other churches where abuse of power takes place. This type of practice is not unique to this particular church. This form of abuse, for lack of a better term, is more common than we would like to believe. The challenge is for those of us who can see the difference to actually intervene and make a difference. In the same article by David Henke, he defines spiritual abuse as “the misuse of a position of power, leadership, or influence to further the selfish interests of someone other than the individual who needs help.”³ Now, when you think of spiritual seekers, which would be those who attend church, we are all individuals who need help.

² David Henke, “Spiritual Abuse,” *Watchman Fellowship Profile – The Watchman Expositor*, 1996, www.watchman.org/profile/abusepro.htm.

³ Ibid.

One consistent challenge and heartbreak at Bridgeport Unity was the requests from parishioners for prayer for themselves or for others. The consistent response was that people are only able to pray for themselves. The challenge, parishioners were seeking help. With such a response they were rendered wounded. This type of exchange was common. Many seekers were wounded during the course of seeking spiritual comfort and healing. Because of this exchange it was easy for this writer to comfortably use the terms ‘wounded seeker’ and ‘disaffected seeker’ for this project.’

As a result of a variety of situations, many people left that church with this writer being one of them. Departure was both easy and challenging. It was easy to leave a place where I became the target of anger and rage. It was a challenge because so many others were being wounded and didn’t see that they were at the impact of powerful negativity. [Please refer to Appendix 2 for a letter to the pastor ending that relationship.]

Those of us who are on this path know that we are seeking something. The call for religion in one’s life is the call for a relationship with a higher being, a higher authority – a relationship with God. For those who are trying to gain access to the path to spiritual fulfillment, the setting and experience described above does not provide access to that path. Further, there are many who have been separated from the faith tradition of their upbringing either by excommunication, informal expulsion, or intolerable conditions which led them to separate by their own volition. Of those who have been separated for whatever reason or by whatever means, there is no clear method for finding a pathway back to a relationship with God. This premise is with no distinction between faith traditions or practices. There is a universal theme that is not unique to Christianity,

Judaism or Islam. Distancing practices or separation as a result has no particular bias and is not unique to a particular faith practice.

Definitions

For the purposes of this project the following definitions are in use.

Disaffected seeker:

1. People who have never been connected with a faith tradition
2. People who have been hurt by an individual or an incident and are currently not actively participating with the faith tradition
3. People who have little connection after having had experience of frustration or disappointment
4. People who connect out of obligation, loyalty, habit, or some other reason that inhibits their ability to have a fulfilling spiritual experience⁴

To be disaffected is something much deeper than simply not connecting. The absence of connections between human beings is not necessarily a reflection of experience of being disaffected. The operating context for this project with respect to what it means to be disaffected is that there is a deeper, substantial heartbreak or disappointment that impedes one's ability to be in communion with a faith tradition.

Ultimately, this means that the seeker must either find methods to cope with unfulfilled spiritual needs or have these needs addressed by other means if not simply ignored. However the individual might choose to address their spiritual needs, the disaffected seeker will always be confronted by unresolved issues related to their spirituality.

Spiritual Abuse was defined above, but there are a few additional elements cited by Henke that merit mention here.

Common Characteristics of Spiritual Abuse:

⁴ Adapted from David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse: Recognizing and Escaping Spiritual Manipulation and False Spiritual Authority Within the Church*, Bethany House Publishers, Bloomington, MN 55438

1. Authoritarian – Over-emphasis on authority. It is not the place of followers to judge or correct leadership.
2. Image Conscious – scrupulous in maintaining an image of righteousness. Paranoia may be presented and there is a presentation that leaders have a special understanding of the religion.
3. Suppress Criticism – the person who challenges, dissents or presents open discussion about issues becomes the problem. Thinking independently is suppressed and frowned upon.
4. Perfectionistic – there are standards by which most cannot meet. There is an expectation that perfection is to be present by followers and those who adhere are taken into inner circles.
5. Unbalanced – there is an exalted sense of this particular religion being better or more valid. Biblical interpretation is taken to extremes and often used to support self-serving claims to demonstrate a special status with God.⁵

⁵ Adapted from David Henke, Spiritual Abuse, *Watchman Fellowship Profile – The Watchman Expositor*, 1996, www.watchman.org/profile/abusepro.htm.

CHAPTER 2

PERSONAL SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

It is important and necessary to include a hermeneutical self-inventory. The relevance of this material is important in that it paints the picture for the context within which the work of this project takes place. Hermeneutics as a contextual approach is similar to that phrase that comes from real estate. In real estate it is often said that there were three things that are essential for success, 'location, location, and location.' With hermeneutics the exact same thing is true. Hermeneutics provides the information that supports the location from which the writer or observer is operating. Please refer to this writer's in-depth personal Hermeneutical Self-Inventory found in Appendix I.

In short, I grew up in a Baptist church. It was the church of my family. To be more accurate, it was the church of my mother's family. My father was never intimately (or passively) related to the church. I'm not sure if it was because he was not exposed to the church or if he lost interest. It was something we never talked about in depth because his assessment of ministers was short and sweet. In his thinking and speaking, they were crooks and thieves out to get your money, so he had no use for them. I think my father was more of an agnostic than anything else.

On the other hand, my mother was a powerful woman of faith. She was the living expression of faith that had me learn unequivocally, about the existence of God. Further, she demonstrated how to have a powerful relationship with God. The one thing she could not do is reconcile the disconnect between some of the illogical, irrational, inappropriate

actions of church leadership and how far a person of sound mind could faithfully follow. She and I would discuss such issues for hours and her faith would always separate the person from the higher caller. I was not able to do that.

Because of that inability to reconcile such disconnects, and being repeatedly diminished by that church, I left church altogether. There were a number of other reasons and unfortunately there were very few options to explore as alternatives. There were enough reasons for me to leave when I could and so I did upon leaving home for college (if not sooner). My search for a church home or place for spiritual peace was put on hold.

One Other Milestone Toward Departure from Organized Religion

There are many reasons why people leave the religious tradition of their upbringing. We have witnessed the reports of abuse as a result of inappropriate behavior and we have witnessed the spiritual disillusionment of those seekers who have been demoralized by negative experiences.

Howard Thurman in his autobiography⁶ talks about the death of his father. This was at a time when the young Thurman was seeking a clear definition for himself inside the context of religion. It is a powerfully moving story. Because his father was not affiliated with the tiny black church of the area, the pastor refused to perform the funeral. As Thurman cites, there were no provisions for nonmember to be buried by the church. The presiding pastor refused and the family was left to engage the services of a travelling minister.

In using the services of the travelling minister, the family encountered quite a different experience than one would expect. The minister took the opportunity to actually

⁶ Howard Thurman, *With Heart in Hand*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, Orlando, FL, 1979.

preach about the perils of not being connected to an organized church. He suggested that they would meet with an experience similar to that of Thurman's father. It was out of that experience that Thurman decided that when he became an adult, he would never have anything to do with the church. This illustration of abuse of power has a great number of repercussions and negative impacts.

Upon reflection on the experience of Thurman, some of the impacts include:

1. The perpetuation of a fear based religious experience for all involved
2. The decision by Thurman to turn his back on the church
3. The spiritual abuse of the mourning family and others
4. The added confusion to folks who are seeking clarity but having an experience contrary to clarity

This experience is not unique to Thurman or Christianity. This is an abuse of power.

From my own life, a life long childhood friend (Joel Kelly) died suddenly while he was working overseas in England. There were numerous problems with getting his body back to this country and that took its toll on the family and all of us who knew and loved Joel. Growing up, my mother made sure that Joel and his brother Rudy went to church with my brother Larry and me. This was non-negotiable and it was in fact something that we looked forward to every week.

When Joel died, my mother went to the pastor of our childhood church to make arrangements for his burial. The pastor was Reverend Charles T. Epps, Sr., and he knew Joel throughout our upbringing. Rev. Epps refused to conduct the service. This refusal broke my mother's heart and broke all of our hearts. There was no rational explanation for such a decision except for Reverend Epps standing on a principle that did not serve

those in grief and those in need – essentially, if you weren't a tithing active member then you could not be acknowledged with an in church funeral service.

It is situations such as these that cause questions about how organized religion can support those in need as opposed to dispiriting those in need. Webster defines dispiriting as 'to deprive of morale or enthusiasm.' There are so many examples of organized religion and its leaders 'dispiriting' seekers who are on the path. This is how so many have come to be disaffected seekers. This is just one of the events that lead to my being negatively impacted.

CHAPTER 3

POWER, AUTHORITY AND ETHICS – USES AND ABUSES

Religious law takes on different shapes and forms that are specific to the faith tradition. There are many similarities in faith traditions and laws of the religions based upon the Abrahamic faiths. Clearly there are different interpretations with each variation of the faith expression. Theologian and philosopher Emanuel Levinas wrote extensively on the Mishnah and Gemara. The Mishnah and Gemara date back to 200 CE. They reflect the oral and written traditions of the rabbis of that era. These writings capture Jewish law.

Annette Aronowicz authored the book, *Nine Talmudic Readings*. In this volume, she captures “Four Talmudic Readings” which is a translation of the work of Emanuel Levinas. The readings are a collection of talks presented to the Colloquia of Jewish Intellectuals that was organized every year in Paris under the World Jewish Congress since 1957. Emanuel Levinas presented these talks between 1963 and 1967⁷.

The writing of Levinas is truly experiential. He works with the treatment of the Talmud stories in the same manner and style from which they are written – they tell stories. There is a parable nature inherent in the style and approach of his writing. Levinas tells a story in such a way that there are situations that challenge life choices. We are presented with life choices – real time life situations and then challenged with the task of reconciling an issue or moral dilemma.

⁷ Annette Aronowicz, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, Indiana University Press, 1994.

Each Talmudic reading sets a tone for Levinas as he weaves a series of challenging questions for the reader. Levinas carves out teaching points from these readings to make powerful points. He does not draw conclusions for the reader. By contrast he constructs a path for the reader to follow and arrive at his or her own conclusions.

Levinas' intention is to engage the audience into a consideration of the concept of 'the other.' This was a central theme for him. In short, Levinas proposed that we were all 'other' especially to God.

The similarity of the Talmudic to Muslim hermeneutics is that the "text" in the Muslim faith is the Qur'an. The Qur'an is the written representation of an oral history. The similarity is that the Talmud or the Qur'an are not the historically accurate "official" representations of history, but rather an image, icon, symbol or even a place-hold for historical events. That may be even more accurately stated as those texts are written renderings of an oral history. To go even further, it could be said that these writings may even be social commentaries on the elements of life during those times. This is also true of the Bible. Relative to the Bible, this becomes problematic with those who would prefer to work from literal interpretations of the Bible, and that can be problematic.

The way in which Levinas puts it, "The Talmud is the transcription of the oral tradition of Israel."⁸ The Talmud essentially "governs the daily and ritual life, as well as the thought," according to Levinas."⁹ How similar this is to the Qur'an in Islamic faith? Additionally, this is not too different than the approach that many Christians have with

⁸ Annette Aronowicz, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, page 3

⁹ Ibid., page 3.

respect to the Bible. The similarities are quite apparent. There is an additional point of interest presented by Levinas.

Not only does Levinas cite the importance of that which was included in the Talmud as well as that which was excluded, he makes a point about different versions of the Talmud. There is a distinction that Levinas importantly points out in that there are two versions of the Talmud – parallel versions. This is not different in concept than the different versions or translations of the Bible that many different Christian approaches take on with that text. Further, this is exactly the same challenge presented with the parallel versions of the same story by different Gospels. The point that Levinas makes in this vein is to disclose the version that he has based his writings upon – the Babylonian Talmud. This is important in that he is essentially providing a hermeneutical context for the reader.

Levinas' approach and contribution to this work is important because he cites the value of steering away from a complete and total application of the written (or oral) traditional law. "No one can refuse the insights of history. But we do not think they are sufficient for everything."¹⁰ He is very clear early on when he cites that there is no point in arguing about specific content being correct or accurate but rather simply 'object-signs.' These signs include: "biblical verses, objects, persons, situations, rites-functions... Never does the meaning of these symbols fully dismiss the materiality of the symbols which suggest it."¹¹ Levinas in this writer's opinion is saying that the symbol is a place hold for the experience and not a replacement for the experience. The broad

¹⁰ Annette Aronowicz, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, page 5.

¹¹ Ibid., page 8

application here is that the ‘law,’ as written serves a purpose, but we should not ‘think they are sufficient for everything.’¹²

In many situations of abuse of power through the use of sacred texts, this is the case. The application of various texts is taken to be literal, ‘sufficient for everything,’ and often used as weapons of harm and pain. This is where many religious leaders in positions of power and authority violate a sacred trust and inflict harm, damage and embarrassment.

It is not too much of a challenge for one to perform modest research to collect data on clergy malfeasance. The offenses range from illegitimate paternity to financial theft. Now it is clear that these people are human being first and that is understood. However, the willful violation of an esteemed station of authority is another matter.

There are a number of impacts of the violation of authority. The creation of a disaffected seeker comes out of an abuse of power and authority. The result is that we find people who are left so deeply wounded that they often have no sense of their spiritual selves. Consider this quote by Emerson, “You cannot talk of colors to a blind man, or reason with one who is insane; nor can you speak of truth, beauty, virtue or appeal to one as a religious being who has no inspiration.”¹³ This quote points to the life essence within a person being so profoundly impacted that the presence of inspiration is missing such that there is no place to locate a position for religion within that person. However, that premise by Emerson being true, there are certainly other unintended outcomes of religious or spiritual abuse.

¹² Annette Aronowicz, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, page 8

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Transcendentalism: and Other Addresses*, Alden Publishers, New York, 1886

The impact of the abuse of power has a variety of results. Unfortunately in our current experience the outcomes of inappropriate clergy behavior on disaffected seekers is not only negative, but creates a larger impact in the community and the world. Many are surprised by the rise in home-grown radical Muslims. This is not just a Christian or Jewish problem. The multifaith community has a larger obligation in this arena as there is a larger issue.

In his book, *Radical Islam Rising*¹⁴, Quintan Wiktorowicz takes an in-depth look at various extremists Muslim movements in the West. His approach is from the perspective of how extremist groups strategize their recruiting. Not surprisingly he cites fertile ground for new recruits in the midst of disaffected seekers.

These disaffected seekers have been negatively impacted by their prior experience. They have become disillusioned or disappointed with their contact with Islam. What the author cites is that a charismatic leader convinces these disaffected seekers that he will teach them real Islam.

One of the points that the author makes in describing how these disaffected seekers of Islam are created is through a class of culture and religion. "In the West, many Muslims have experienced an identity crisis that makes them question what it means to be a Muslim in a non-Muslim country."¹⁵ This element alone is enough to create personal uncertainty. When you take this social alienation and consider that it is operating on top of a less than positive religious experience, it is easy to see that the result would be a

¹⁴ Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, Lanham, MD 2005

¹⁵ Ibid, Page 86

disaffected seeker. Ultimately according to the author, these persons make the best candidates to become members of radical Islamic groups.

This illustration is quite distressing. Not only does it point out the negative impact of being separated from one's faith tradition, it also points to one of the negative byproducts that come out of the Christian dominant non-pluralistic society.

So while this particular separation may not be part of a formal excommunication process with that faith tradition, it does provide a huge opening for solicitation by radical groups. Separation by choice leaves one open to any number of less than positive experiences. The greater liability as cited here often goes unnoticed during the normal course of events. Ultimately under the conditions that are being described by Wiktorowicz, the undesired outcome is the formation of radical extremists.

Howard Thurman in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*¹⁶, speaks quite extensively on the topic in his own way. "That it became [Christianity]...a religion of the powerful and the dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus."¹⁷ Thurman is clear that Jesus was teaching for the oppressed and not to or for those in power. Religious practices had become an instrument of power and abuse over those who did not have power. He is clear in how the abuse of that power has had the most damaging effects.

Those impacted by the abuse of power become prone to the simple threat of violence or harm. There is no need for there to be an actual event, the mere threat becomes sufficient over time with the oppressed. "Always back of the threat is the rumor

¹⁶ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1996, (1949 first published)

¹⁷ Ibid., page 29

or the fact that somewhere, under some similar circumstances violence was used. That is all that is necessary. The threat becomes the effective instrument.”¹⁸ This is so true for the oppressed whom we call disaffected seekers. They are impacted to the point that the mere suggestion or gesture of a threat of some sort is adequate in rendering them immobile and frozen into a state of inactivity.

Thurman’s writing is so insightful and relevant to a much larger issue and audience. At the time, he was writing to the issue of segregation, race and religion. There are many of the same issues relative to religion that he was pointing to that still could stand to hear his message today.

There is the point that he makes which is so powerfully related to the issue of the disaffected seeker. The problem that is experienced silently, is that the victim becomes comfortable with and familiar with fear as a constant companion. It is the sensation of fear that displaces all else and takes on the name of faith. According to Thurman, “Fear thus becomes a form of life assurance, making possible the continuation of physical existence with a minimum of active violence.”¹⁹ Now if we pull that concept apart, what are the implications?

Fear becomes a way of life and there is not a sense that there can be freedom. The children and relatives of these victims become supporters of this thinking. Freedom from fear becomes a distant fantasy or even worse, a curse uttered by the person suggesting freedom. According to Thurman, “There *are* some things that are worse than

¹⁸ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, page 39

¹⁹ Ibid, page 41

death. To deny one's own integrity of personality in the presence of the human challenge is one of those things."²⁰

This unfortunately is the nature of spiritual abuse. The essence of an individual's imagination and zeal for life is impacted. It should also be noted that these elements are often subtle and go unnoticed. These traits are common and so many disaffected seekers suffer silently.

David Johnson And Jeff VanVonderen have done extensive work and counseling in the area of spiritual abuse. Their book, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, captures a number of stories and outcomes that originate from their work.

According to Johnson and VanVonderen, "spiritual abuse occurs when someone is treated in a way that damages them spiritually. As a deeper result, their relationship with God-or that part of them that is capable of having a relationship with God-becomes wounded or scarred."²¹

Their writings come out of their experiences in working at a church called Church of the Open Door, located in Minneapolis Minnesota. This is where they have been ministering together for over 10 years as of the writing of the book. It was out of their work in this church that they discovered a trend. They saw that many people whom they counseled were wounded. It wasn't until they compared notes to discover the nature of the trend. It was their conclusion that the cause of the wounds was spiritual abuse.

²⁰ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, page 51

²¹ David Johnson and Jeff VanVonderen, *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, Grand Rapids, MI, Bethany House Publishing, 2005, Page 13.

They saw that the cause of the abuse was, "wrong thinking in the areas of spiritual authority and teaching."²² Their conclusion was that they not only have to write a book, but also had to spread the message and impact of the negative effects of spiritual abuse.

It is clear in their writing that the intent is to speak to the victims as well as to those in power. Their message is clear and pointed and their hearts are definitely in the right place. The phenomenon of spiritual abuse is not just a simple concept to them. Through their work, their ministry and their counseling, their stance is to positively impact and heal those who have been wounded.

²² Ibid, page 13

CHAPTER 4

EXCOMMUNICATION

In the prior chapter we looked at separation primarily from a power context. The backdrop was the church as the governing agency dispensing that authority and some of the impacts. Now we turn to more of the formal structures within the formalized structure of the church that may also play a part in the alienation of disaffected seekers.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, excommunication is a noun, 1: an ecclesiastical censure depriving a person of the rights of church membership 2: exclusion from Fellowship in a group or community. The practice of excommunication is more common in Catholic churches both Roman and Greek. The chief grounds for excommunication tend to be heresy, (deviation from church law or any persistent defiance of church authority).

In medieval times the state was expected to join in the punishment of the offender. It would not be unusual for the punishment to include public humiliation or even death. The Reformers continued excommunication in a modified form and supported state punishment. Gradually over time Protestant state churches began this practice less and less. In smaller more strict Protestant churches in North America excommunication is still maintained as an aspect of discipline. Often these practices are not openly spoken about.

In current times excommunication, or simply separation from the church has taken on a much larger and broader existence. It is not too difficult to find people who

have been separated from the church, or by the church for variety of reasons. In a very broad sense I would use the term excommunication to include any activity that separates an individual from their chosen religious community. These activities include improprieties by clergy, personal acts that may have been unacceptable by the congregation (being a victim of rape, being divorced, or being a single unwed mother).

It is quite interesting that these activities cause people to leave their chosen religious community. When we consider the fact that religious communities exist to embrace people, heal people, and be a pathway for people who have strong relationship with God, the very act of separation is a contradiction to that basic belief. Although formal excommunication may not be openly practiced as it once was in history, the covert existence of it is quite prevalent today.

Religion should be a process that brings people together. Religion should be a process by which people become a community. Historically, parishes were the expression of community that existed with the church as the central point. It naturally follows that community and religion are intimately and powerfully related. Religion is also the process of worship that brings people together. At a very basic level, this could be said to be a theme that exists without regard to religious differences and more importantly in consideration of religious purposes. In the final analysis we are more similar than different when it comes to religion. At the same time it is often through our differences of opinion within and between religions that keeps us apart.

When we consider spiritual abuse as a vehicle for the execution of excommunication it is easy to see a causal link. What may start out as being an issue of control quickly escalates into not only control but also heavy-handed domination. Beyond

that, heavy-handed domination evolves into diminishing other people. All of this is done in the name of religion. All of this is done under a practice or activities of spiritual abuse.

It's quite easy to identify methods for separating members of a particular religious group or community. There were certain rules that if broken required that the individual be sent away or set apart. This process is really not too difficult to conceive. It's quite easy to visually illustrate or mentally conceive. The mechanics of separation are quite easy and simple to implement.

In the Muslim faith, the holy month of Ramadan is a reminder for believers to return to the basic rudiments of their faith. This is a month of daylight abstinence. Fasting is a core activity of this time. The Qu'ran drives the way in which the observance is honored. In an article for the Washington Times, writer Larry Witham interviewed Sabir Rahman, president at that time, of the Muslim Community Center of Silver Spring. The article printed in October 31, 2001 edition, goes into great detail about observances and failure to observe. There are strict regulations about eating and even the public slaughter of a goat. When asked if someone were to eat in public during this time, what would happen? His response, "...people ask them to stop, and if they don't, then we ask them to leave. But there is no excommunication in Islam."²³ This is interesting in theory and more than likely not the case in practice.

From the Bible we have many illustrations of separation or excommunication. Whether these illustrations reflect separation from the community or from a religious group, the final result is that an individual is set apart or sent away. The act of sending someone away is the ultimate act of alienation and separation. It is also a powerful

²³ Larry Witham, "Fulfilling Ramadan Means Fast During Day," *The Washington Times*, October 31, 2001, Page 9.

statement about the dominance and domination of an institution. Such an act says very little about consideration for an individual.

The Woman Caught in Adultery

They went each to his own house, 1: but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. 3The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst 4they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. 5Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” 6This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” 8And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” 11She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”] (John 7:53,1-11 New Revised Standard Version)

There are many examples of alienation found in the Bible. The case of the woman who was caught in adultery is one example. How quickly were these men ready to judge and punish her based upon the discovery of her inappropriate behavior? There clearly wasn't the same level of rejection being lodged against the man. There were no thoughts about how the men who were judging her should be compassionate. The scribes and the Pharisees brought this woman before Jesus for his agreement that this person needed to be punished for her actions. They referred to the “law of Moses” as the guiding principle behind the actions that must follow as a consequence for her actions.

This story from the Bible is an illustration of the ‘authority’ being exercised by this group of scribes and Pharisees. As the story goes, Jesus invites anyone in the group who has not sinned to throw the first stone. One by one each of the male accusers walks

away in shame. None of them are left in judgment of this woman. The group was baiting Jesus. They want him to contradict his own stance on compassion, but the more important point here is that the abuse of power was clearly being exercised in order to punish (stone to death) this woman caught in adultery.

Here we have a woman who is not denying any guilt. As a matter of fact, it is clear that she has conceded her guilt and has yielded to the prescribed consequences. There is no resistance on her part regarding ‘due process.’ The intervention of Jesus makes a way for the accusers to no longer be there judging her, but what about her reconnection with that community? It is not clear that after the accusers left whether or not she was accepted back into that community. When they’re all gone, Jesus turns to the woman and asks, “where are they that accuse you?” (John 7:53:10 NRSV) As she looks around and sees no one, she is left with nothing to say. The response by Jesus to the woman is, “go your way and sin no more.” (John 7:53:11 NRSV)

That is to the same faith community that was standing in judgment of her. The unanswered question is how does she regain standing (acceptance) and healing from the very community that called her into judgment?

There is something about the approach used by Jesus in embracing this woman regardless of her history, her sins, or her past. While the scribes and Pharisees were ready to pass judgment and execute her (execution is the ultimate form of excommunication), Jesus actually embraced her (figuratively), and invited her into his community.

A Jewish Perspective

There are a number of things within traditional Jewish law for which one can be excommunicated. During the life of Benedict de Spinoza, he was excommunicated at a

very young age from the Jewish community. Much of the reason for his separation was for not being a good student. He insisted upon a point of view that was not in line with the religious teachings of his day. For that reason, "...in 1656, at the age of twenty-four, he was formally excommunicated and cast out from the Jewish communion, - a proceeding not uncommon among religions societies of other faiths, but regarded in those and earlier times as an act of far more fearful import and accompanied by more solemn ceremonies..."²⁴ This reflection on the commonplace nature of excommunications is clear. It is also clear that there was a tremendous amount of 'fearful import' with the accompaniment of 'solemn ceremonies' as part of the process. These activities were held at a very high level of importance.

The citation goes further. The nature of the separation was most severe in the way in which the separation was carried out. It is further noted that, "All Jews were forbidden to speak or write to him, or to do him any service, or abide under the same roof with him, or approach within four cubits' length of him, or to read anything written or dictated by."²⁵ As can be seen, their measures were harsh and quite clear. There was very little room for questions or even the ability to feign a lack of understanding. The terms are quite clear.

What is interesting about the separation of Spinoza was that he was simply voicing his views. Granted, many of his views were counter to the teachings of the religious leaders, but where is the compassion? Where is the tolerance? Spinoza is said to have responded to the charges in Spanish, "in which he defended his view as orthodox,

²⁴ Benedict De Spinoza IV, *The Ethics of Benedict de Spinoza*, D. Van Nostrand Publishers, New York, 1876, page vi.

²⁵ Ibid., page vi.

and condemned the rabbis for accusing him of ‘horrible practices and other enormities’ merely because he had neglected ceremonial observances.”²⁶

A Pentecostal Perspective

In an article by Roger E. Olson, from *The Christian Century Magazine*²⁷, he deals quite candidly with the topic of spiritual abuse with respect to the Pentecostal denomination within which he grew up. His article is rather strong in the way he reflects upon his experiences. From his work we can see that there are clear signs of elements that have a negative impact on people and he is one of those impacted. Shortly thereafter he was banished from Amsterdam.

Olson talks about how he questioned some of the practices and how his “doubts and questions led to a difficult departure from the spiritual movement”²⁸ of his youth. He is clear that some of the practices not only lead to his departure but the separation of many more whom he has met that have also left under similar circumstances for similar reasons. He is clear that there is an inclination to keep things within the movement and within tightly controlled circles. These are elements that support his article’s title of ‘Dark Side.’

“Endemic to Pentecostalism is a profoundly anti-intellectual ethos. It is manifested in a deep suspicion of scholars and educators and especially biblical scholars and theologians.”²⁹ This statement by itself is a powerful indictment against not simply

²⁶ Roger Scruton, *Spinoza*, Oxford University Press, 1986, page 9

²⁷ Roger E. Olson, “Pentecostalism’s Dark Side.” *The Christian Century*, Volume: 123. Issue: 5, Published March 7, 2006. Page 27

²⁸ Ibid., Page 27.

²⁹ Ibid., Page 27.

the Pentecostal movement, but also a statement about the larger issue of how this type of activity creates a greater divide within society. Olsen in this very article talks about the number of true scholars that there are in the Pentecostal movement and how that suspicion brings the movement itself into a questionable light of suspicion.

He goes further to cite that there are numerous substantiated cases of clergy misconduct. “Another part of Pentecostalism’s dark side is rampant sexual and financial scandals. From early Pentecostal leader Charles Parham to Aimee Scruple McPherson to Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, the movement has been wracked by charges of misconduct, many of which have been substantiated by investigators.”³⁰ This is clearly an issue with the leadership, but what about the people? Where are the considerations for those disaffected seekers who after such dramatic and emotionally taxing episodes are left to put the pieces back together?

Olsen clearly cites spiritual abuse as an issue in the Pentecostal Church. “A hallmark of spiritual abuse is treating the person who dares to point out a problem as the problem. Such behavior is widespread in Pentecostal circles.”³¹ Given this observation, he is also quick to offer up a solution.

The Memphis Miracle is a project that Olsen cites as a proud demonstration of what type of healing can take place when issues are addressed. There was a practice of not accepting black denominations from the Pentecostal Fellowship of North America. Church leadership waited until the old guard died or retired and disbanded that organization. They then went into action and requested that African-American

³⁰ Olson, *Pentecostalism’s Dark Side*

³¹ Olson, *Pentecostalism’s Dark Side*

Pentecostal leaders start a new association. Under this new leadership, the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches of North America was formed in Memphis in 1994. This is a demonstration of what could be possible when a critical eye and an openness is employed in looking at responsible leadership.

CHAPTER 5

IN-COMMUNICATION – INCLUSION - HEALING TREAT THE PEOPLE’S NEEDS AS HOLY

In his book, *The Politics of Jesus*, Dr. Obery M. Hendricks, Jr., makes reference to several strategies. The intent of the strategy is to address through what he cites is political means, interventions that could reflect the politics of Jesus. In his writing his intention is to point out that Jesus was a political figure. He also wanted to suggest that many of the activities of Jesus were a part of a larger strategy. The larger strategy had real and focused activities.

One of the strategies which is particularly relevant to this project is what Hendricks calls, "Treat the People's Needs as Holy." This particular strategy is quite profound and pointed. What is profound about it is that he bases this strategy (and the others) on the content of the Lord's Prayer.

One of the main points made by Dr. Hendricks in this strategy is directly reflected in its title. To treat the needs of the people as holy not out of obligation, or necessity but rather, inside the context of a holy calling is quite different than what is normally practiced. This single strategy can be taken in isolation and sums up quite powerfully the calling of any church or any religious community. There is a universal call for service to humanity in this phrase.

What Dr. Hendricks has reflected in this strategy could be the basis for a powerful theology. This strategy of treating the needs of people as holy in and of itself cuts through

any self-serving interests. This strategy of treating the people's needs as holy establishes that the act of meeting human needs is on par with service to a higher source.

Just as the prior section addresses the elements of the Lord's Prayer, so does Dr. Hendricks. It is the premise of Dr. Hendricks that the context and intent of the Lord's Prayer is to lift the needs of the people to a level of being considered holy. In this strategy Dr. Hendricks makes no distinction between rich, poor, black or white. The only requirement is that the people have needs to be met.

Hendricks goes on to point out that treating the needs of people as holy as a concept that was not originated by Jesus. He refers to the book of Hebrews and the concept of hesed. Hesed refers to maintaining a steadfast love. This concept is quite common in early scripture. It is inside of this context that Hendricks makes the case for treating the people's needs as holy.

In his book *Jesus and Judaism*, EP Sanders looks at the role of sinners with respect to the ministry of Jesus. One of the key points that Sanders makes is that the ministry of Jesus was focused on and included sinners. This was quite distinct from the way in which the church of his day operated. Sanders suggests that the inclusion or consideration for sinners was not what the church was about at that time. He makes reference to certain Biblical scripture to support his point.

Much of what Sanders is pointing to is that the ministry of Jesus was more about attacking the church and its leadership. During those times there was not a lot of acceptance of people who would be considered sinners. The book of Mark 2:17 cites, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners."

This reference is a clear statement about the audience to whom Jesus was ministering. Sanders not only suggests, but states outright that the church of those times catered mainly to the affluent and those who were considered socially upstanding. Sanders proposes questions throughout his inquiry as to whether or not Jesus was in a sense, throwing stones at the organized church. Could the ministry of Jesus with these attacks on church hierarchy been more about challenging an exclusive socially accepted norm or was it truly about the work of inclusion?

The nature of the ministry of Jesus in the writing of standards suggests that there may have been some thread of truth in the stories about Jesus associating with sinners and tax collectors. However, Sanders is quick to add that from that thread came many more iterations as time went on. Sanders cites, "Luke was concerned to emphasize that the disreputable people with whom Jesus associated were moved to repentance and reformation."³²

This statement is both good news and bad news. The good news is that these 'disreputable' individuals were moved to repentance and reformation. The bad news is that this suggests these very same people were not accepted by the church because they had not repented and were not reformed.

In an extensive inquiry Sanders creates a context of compelling nature. He is clear that the Pharisees were enemies of Jesus. He is also clear that there were quite a number of compelling facts to suggest that the ministry of Jesus was not only inclusive but, because of that inclusiveness that added to the cause of the death of Jesus.

1. That 'Pharisees', 'haberim', and 'Rabbis' are more or less equivalent terms.

³²

E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, First Fortress Press, 1985. Page 175

2. That in Jesus's day the Pharisees (= the haberim) controlled Judaism.
3. That the term 'sinners' includes the ordinary people, those called 'amme ha-arets in Rabbinic literature.
4. That the leaders of Judaism (believed to be the Pharisees) successfully made these people feel excluded.
5. That Jesus's uniqueness consists in part in his offering forgiveness to repentant sinners (= common people).
6. The Jesus offended the Pharisees by associating with the common people and offering them forgiveness. The Association, in the form of table fellowship, is held to have transgressed the Pharisaic purity code.
7. That Jesus' behavior was so offensive as to account, in no small part, for his execution.³³

This work profiled by Sanders not only parallels the work of this project, it is a reflection of the challenge of diversity, plurality, and inclusion in our society today. The illustration here of the challenge of how to work with, and live with, those who may not be like us is a problem that dates back to Jesus himself. What is interesting and ironic is that the work of Bishop Carlton Pearson seems to parallel the writing of EP Sanders. The implications are clear with respect to power and authority over those who do not have power and authority.

He came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?" And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house."³⁴

The work of inclusion were being in communication is quite a challenge. In concept, this is easy to conceive. In practice it's a totally different issue. It could be said that this is the exact same challenge that was faced by Jesus himself.

³³ E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA 1985

³⁴ Matthew 13:54-57, New Revised Standard Version

Providing healing is not as easy as it seems. In referring to the above scripture from the book of Matthew, this statement refers to the return of Jesus to his home. Preceding his return home, Jesus had performed a great number of miracles. He had developed a reputation such that people anticipated his arrival wherever he would show up. There was excitement about what Jesus could provide. Unfortunately, this was not the case upon his return to his home.

A similar process is reflected in the work of a Pentecostal Bishop named Carlton Pearson. This Tulsa, Oklahoma Bishop is known for teaching a "Gospel of Inclusion." In short its teachings were about inclusiveness. Teaching about an inclusiveness that transcended different faith traditions, denominations, or dogma. For this very reason, Bishop Pearson found himself being shunned by his own denomination.

In his book, *The Gospel of Inclusion: Reaching Beyond Religious Fundamentalism To the True Love Of God and Self*,³⁵ Pearson takes a bold stand against traditional thinking. He demonstrates a gospel of inclusion rather than simply preaching about it. His preaching as well as this book has alienated him in many religious circles.

In a newspaper article written by Julia Duin for the Washington Times, she outlines many of the challenges faced by Pearson. The article written in 2003, preceded the Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops, a group of 300 Cleveland-based men. In that article, she quotes many attendees of that meeting sharing their dissenting views appear since theology.³⁶ (not sure a complete sentence)

³⁵ Carlton Pearson, *The Gospel of Inclusion*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2006

³⁶ Julia Duin, "Keeping the Faith; Bishop Is Being Shunned For 'Gospel of Inclusion,'" *The Washington Times*, March 19, 2003

This illustration from Pearson's example demonstrates not only how difficult it is for healing to occur, but also how difficult it is to create a multifaith experience. Pearson, in many of his activities brought Jews, Muslims, and Christians together. After all, isn't this what a true expression of Christianity is all about? One would have to question the viability of a "gospel of inclusion."

From this article, Pearson is quoted as saying, "you know what the Jews and Hindus and Muslims say to me? 'We don't have any problem with Jesus. It's his followers we cannot stomach.' I tell Christians to stop spending billions of people to hell."³⁷

Bishop Pearson is accurate in describing the challenges of a multifaith engagement. He goes even further to the point of actually living it. His book actually serves two powerful purposes. The first purpose is a clear description of the problem. The second purpose the book serves, is a clear series of steps to address the problem. The compelling message from Bishop Pearson comes through not only what he says, but also what he demonstrates with his actions.

In his book, as in his life, he takes no prisoners. He has no respect for sacred cows. His mission is clear, identify the issue and then attack it straight on. One example comes from his introduction where he says, "Religion resist progress. It is a form of witchcraft with which man has become familiar. We know rites, rituals, doctrines, and disciplines, and we have become dependent on them. They have become manipulative,

³⁷ Julia Duin, Keeping the Faith: Bishop Is Being Shunned For 'Gospel of Inclusion,'

fear-based force that holds millions of people hostage. Psychologists call this "addictive codependency."³⁸

This 'addictive codependency' runs rampant throughout churches. It is this type of behavior that can be seen, clearly described, and is often unashamedly demonstrated by persons in charge. All of this is at the expense of the people. This type of approach offers no opening or opportunity for people to be dealt with as whole human beings. These types of mechanisms at work merely serve their own self-interests, or more accurately, the self-interest of those in charge.

To Bishop Pearson's credit, he uses his book as a tool of inclusion. The good Bishop Pearson allows for an inclusive perspective of God. "I came to the initial stunning conclusion that God is not a Christian, even though I use Christian Scripture and principles to put forth my premise of Inclusion consciousness."³⁹ Given this as a starting point with the admission of a lack of singularity of ownership of God, it is easy to see an opening for how to prepare to receive and create a multifaith experience. It is this thinking when expanded provides for a plurality of inclusion.

Diana Eck is a renowned theologian and director of the Pluralism Project. She is quite clear about the difference between diversity and pluralism and how they are not the same. Her work and her writing clearly reflect a great deal of thought, research, and reflection on this topic. Her interest in this topic is not a passing fancy. It is clearly a life commitment that is reflected in her work.

³⁸ Pearson, *The Gospel of Inclusion*, Page 7.

³⁹ Ibid., Page 8.

What Diana Eck offers in the way of solutions is quite simple. At the same time, simple solutions are plagued with social and cultural landmines caught up in the language of defining diversity and define pluralism.

CHAPTER 6

THE PROJECT – HEALING AND FORMING A CHURCH

This project and the process evolved out of an expressed need, a convergence of circumstances, and an opportunity for healing. What began as a study group of persons from different faith traditions (Jewish, Christian and no involvement) became a collective, cohesive body committed to spiritual healing and growth.

After a rather sad church meeting there were a number of people who became clear in their own thinking that they were negatively impacted. That meeting in March served as a pivotal event in that people on their own terms arrived at the conclusion that they were being abused. It was shortly after that meeting that the project and the process of healing began.

To be clear, there was no intention to start a project, nor was there an intention to start a church at this point in time. This project evolved out of a set of circumstances, needs and opportunity coming together at the right time in the right place. However, when such is divinely placed under the right conditions the only thing to say is yes and the only thing to do is act.

The project consisted of bringing together a group of people who had negative experiences in their spiritual journey. The group consisted of not only folks from the Bridgeport Unity Church, but others who had not fellowshiped anywhere for quite some time. The first part of the process was to explore the nature of healing with this group. The final part was to create a safe space for ongoing healing and call it a church.

GOAL 1: Explore the nature of healing with respect to disaffected seekers who have been negatively impacted by their religious experiences.

There were several meetings conducted where the only agenda was to discuss the nature of the event or events that lead to the participants being left with an experience / sense of being disaffected. These meetings revealed that many of the participants simply had not fully articulated what their experience was like for them. There was no consensus in any of the sessions that conclusively pointed to one particular definition of healing. At the same time, there was no consensus among the participants with respect to having fully resolved their issues or concerns.

In most of the discussions, there was a benign neglect that was fairly consistent. People chose not to directly address their experience of disillusionment. People were clear that there was something to be feared about addressing and confronting the very event or person that was at the crux of their departure.

Session outline in appendix 1.

GOAL 2: Convene seekers who represent the religious diversity of the community and explore views on spiritual healing.

The meetings that were convened did fully reflect the diversity of Fairfield County Connecticut. The data from the Association of Religion Data Archives show that as of 2000, the population of Fairfield County, Connecticut was nearly 1 million people. The majority of those were Christian. As a matter of fact, when considering Jews or

Muslims, they comprised less than 1 percent each.⁴⁰ The other interesting statistic for this area was that about 26% of the total population did not declare a particular religious affiliation.

The demographic of the project group involved Christians and Jews. All had religious training as part of their development. The group was racially diverse and the ages ranged from 20-somethings to mid sixties. There was a balance of men and women and the total group size was six.

Session outline in the appendix 2.

GOAL 3: Develop and deliver a church that outlines steps toward embracing and healing wounded seekers.

On Sunday, July 5, 2009, the first service of The Church of Bethlehem was held in Fairfield, Connecticut. At the time, the name had not been established and the group was still meeting and healing. The people who had been gathering simply knew that the formation of a church was the next thing to do. Healing had begun, people were visibly being restored to a new level of freedom and ease with respect to their spiritual engagement. There was an excitement and vitality present within the group that had not been seen in the same way before. This was truly a new beginning.

The title of the sermon that day was, “Certain Inalienable Rights.” The transcript follows:

Independence Day - Certain Unalienable Rights

“Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings,⁸ and

⁴⁰ http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/counties/09001_2000.asp

I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey..." Exodus 3:7-8

When Moses was to deliver the folks out of Egypt, they were in misery. That is what this scripture from Exodus is all about. The story is about the departure of the Israelites out of bondage and into freedom. We know the story and how it goes. For forty years they wandered in the wilderness until they found their home. Freedom doesn't always mean free, and the price of freedom is never free.

One hundred and eighty three years ago there was a declaration that this country would no longer serve as a colony to King George III of England. The thirteen states at the time banded together to declare their independence. This move was quite radical, as we all know. The Continental Congress got together and constructed and signed what we now know as the Declaration of Independence.

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen United States of America:

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

There is somewhat of a common thread here that I couldn't help but to notice. There is something about this freedom theme that comes through both of these passages. I'm clear that the founding fathers were connected to a higher power and in some aspects of their living they may have forgotten about that when it came to certain things, but they

were clearly onto something in the writing here.

When you look at the story of Moses it is about freedom from Egypt. When you look at the story of the Declaration of Independence, it is about freedom from the King of England. There is another story of freedom and independence that this Independence Day weekend is about as well. As tempting as it may be to talk about gossipy independence – that’s not where I’m going. I’m talking about the moment in time when right after something is declared, there is an experience of elation and shortly thereafter – there is a rush of trepidation. It’s like YAY, but...wait a minute.

This prayer has been answered but...

What do I do now?

How am I supposed to manage all of this now?

Where are my big ideas now?

During the times of Moses, there were many fights during their struggle and journey through the wilderness. People questioned the logic of leaving their life of slavery. They were accustomed to knowing what was to be expected and for the most part, there was a certain comfort in that type of existence.

During the times of slavery, Harriet Tubman was quoted as saying, ‘I would have freed more slaves had they known they were slaves.’ This was no different for Moses. This was not different for those following him. They may have left, but in many ways they were not yet free.

During the time of the Declaration of Independence, there were dissenters who most assuredly thought it better to remain tied to the King of England.

In all of these scenarios, there was something stronger calling into existence a

world of being that defied logic. There was a drawing forth of something that said mediocre is not adequate or sufficient. Good may be all right, but ultimately it is not worthy of what is in God's plan. There is a higher calling that calls for a higher delivery.

What does God have for me to do – or to be?

¹³But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. ¹⁴The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” Exodus 14:13

We too have been freed. Our question now is what to do with this new found freedom? When we look closer, it's not about physical freedom, but freedom of spirit, freedom of choice and freedom of mind. We are truly free spirits and we are in a position today to make a declaration of our own independence.

Independence from I can't do that...

Independence from I can't have that...

Independence from I can't see that for myself...

This is a declaration of independence from our thinking of limitation.

Independence from those things that would have us not fulfill upon our God given calling.

We have the independence to fulfill on all that God has put into our hearts to achieve.

CERTAIN UNALIENABLE RIGHTS:

From the Declaration of Independence...

...endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among

these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness

From the Bible...

⁷for God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline (a sound mind). 2 Timothy 1:7

I can't tell you how long I have struggled with the notion of a church. It has been both a burden and a blessing. I believe that church can be and should be something that is about nurturing people and feeding souls. I will not knock any other church and at the same time I cannot support any church that does not honor, support and respect people. My personal "declaration of independence" reflects my being responsible for that which has been placed in my heart and in my spirit. I don't want a church and at the same time, I know at several levels I am the one. That is the path to my independence this is the path to the Independence that God has intended. God shall be thorough.

Thank you God.

Little did I know that this was the beginning of not only the evolution of a healing / prayer / study group, it was also the beginning of a church that had several ministries starting at once. This was the beginning of a Sunday service that was housed in a home (the original vision of Charles and Myrtle Fillmore), it was also the beginning of a web based ministry with message delivery happening courtesy of modern technology.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Biblical Context:

What sacred texts lend insight / instruction to the nature of healing and recovery?

Myrtle Fillmore, the founding mother of Unity, was known for her healing abilities. She too wrote extensively like her husband Charles on the subject. There is a book that contains a collection of her letters that illustrate some of the healing work for which she is known.

In the book, the Healing Letters of Myrtle Fillmore, she presents the concept of threefold healing. In this concept of threefold healing Myrtle sets forth some guidelines upon which all healing must operate within if it is to be effective. The guidelines are clear, concise, and straightforward. There is no lack of clarity in her approach to healing. She is clear about the methods and how they are implemented.

She calls the process "health law." The three elements that she outlines are: spiritual, mental, and physical. This spiritual aspect of healing she says, is required as all of the elements are in order for the treatment to be effective. The use of the spiritual aspect is, "keeping a person assured of his God-given freedom from anxiety, worry, fear, and lack."⁴¹

The second aspect of this threefold approach involves the mental. The mental component is essential because it introduces and calls upon our human capacity to think logically. As Myrtle put it, "mental, giving him the intelligence that enables him to do

⁴¹ Myrtle Fillmore, *Letters of Myrtle Fillmore*, Unity School of Christianity, 1936, Page 51.

that which promotes health and success."⁴² Now at first blush this seems quite obvious. It's simplistic, basic and surprisingly clear.

The third aspect of this threefold approach is the physical. Myrtle Fillmore was very clear about human nature. She knew that human habits when shaped and formed absolutely drive our actions. Her definition of the physical is, "forming those habits which keep them making the right use of his faculties, and powers, and the life energy and substance."⁴³

This formula that she has presented for healing is not complicated at all. As a matter of fact as guidance and direction for healing in today's society, this approach still stands powerfully as a method to create healing. At the same time it's easy to see that our disregard for these very basic principles has resulted in many of the harmful situations that we see today.

Relative to this project, these healing elements have proven to be invaluable. So much of the work in healing the participants of this project, my wounded seekers, has been centered around Spirit, mental, and physical healing. The focus of this ministry, the Church of Bethlehem, is deeply rooted in lifting people up inside the context of their spiritual, mental, and physical needs.

The work of Myrtle Fillmore in her writings directly addresses the elements that are required in the formation of a new religious community. While the Church of Bethlehem is not associated with the Association of Unity Churches, it is loosely based upon their theology and philosophy.

⁴² Fillmore, *Letters of Myrtle Fillmore*, Page 51.

⁴³ Ibid., Page 51.

The work of Myrtle Fillmore was based in prayer. That is an essential element that is constant and in place with the Church of Bethlehem. Myrtle Fillmore started what is called Silent Unity. This is a 24-hour, 365 day a year ministry that never stops. There is someone always on hand conducting prayer. This prayer ministry is a telephone service where people can call in their prayer needs. This service was founded as a result of Myrtle Fillmore's leadership. This prayer ministry is a core element of what Myrtle Fillmore saw as a requirement of healing.

Myrtle Fillmore saw her threefold approach as an essential balance to our nature and our existence. If this balance was off then our life experience would be off. Being out of balance is what causes weakness, sickness and in harmony and in turn that is what Myrtle says results in, "our failure to identify oneself with God, the divine source, and understanding how to lay hold of an express one's inheritance of spiritual powers."⁴⁴

It was Myrtle's belief that study and training are required to really grasp the power of her threefold nature. She attributed our lack of understanding to this threefold nature as the cause of the weakness, pain and suffering experienced in life. When we remember that we are God's children, and that God has created us as perfect, the law is established within us, then we can continually express and reflect the presence of God in us. This is a powerful path and insight into the power of healing based upon Myrtle Fillmore's teachings.

⁴⁴ Fillmore, *Letters of Myrtle Fillmore*, Page 53

Biblical Question number 2

How can the sacred text of the Unity Church be applied to the formation of a new community?

As such, Unity does not have sacred texts other than the Bible itself. It does however, have writings from Charles and Myrtle Fillmore. In the writing of Myrtle Fillmore is clear and direct guidance that lends itself to support the direction and structure of the formation of a new community.

Myrtle Fillmore was clearly insightful in her writings. She would never stop at the appearances of a person's station in life. Her consideration seems to always be in the expression of the spirit in a person's life. Her writings seem very clear that no person or group can provide spiritual baptism. That type of spiritual baptism is between the individual person and the divine source of all light all power and all love-God. In her own words, Myrtle cites, "when the individual is baptized by the Holy Spirit, that individual knows it, and power from on high is felt and expressed, and is seen by others."⁴⁵

Myrtle is referring to the individual who not only possesses the presence of Spirit, but they demonstrate that presence in the way in which they carry themselves. There is no need for that person to explain the presence of the Holy Spirit within. Just by the way in which they interact in the world, the presence of the Holy Spirit within them is evident to all.

When Myrtle Fillmore refers to people of authority she is not moved by their titles or their particular stations in life. She is clearly concerned with their integrity and the manner in which they conduct business. Through her, this element is more important than anything that can be captured by titles, degrees, citations, or awards. Again in her

⁴⁵ Fillmore, *Letters of Myrtle Fillmore*, Page 91

own words, Myrtle cites, "When you read of those who are using such titles as "Reverend" or "Doctor," or when a center demands such a title of the speaker who is welcomed to its platform, know that spiritual vision will enable you to look beyond all those outer signs and to discern the real character and ability of the leader or minister."⁴⁶

Please note that these above references come from the writing of Myrtle Fillmore. She was addressing their process of ordaining ministers. Her strong opinion on this topic was that she didn't want those being ordained to think that their piety came from a title or an address. In her own words she is clearly stating that there was no latitude being offered in compromising on the integrity of the presence of the Christ Spirit in those people whom they chose to ordain as ministers.

This same thinking and logic applies to the formation of this church, the Church of Bethlehem. There is no effort or attention to create personal gain or self-aggrandizement. The true intention is to not only heal wounded seekers, but to also present in real time, the Holy Spirit for each and every parishioner. Had Myrtle Fillmore been alive today, based on her writings she would most certainly approve of the formation of this ministry. As such this ministry is consistent with the guidelines that she has put forth in her writing.

⁴⁶ Fillmore, *Letters of Myrtle Fillmore*, Page 91

Theological Questions

1. What are sources of Unity ecclesiology? How are they relevant to this new community?

The following are sources behind the formation of Unity's New Thought work.

Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Healing*, *With Key to the Scriptures*⁴⁷

Mary Baker Eddy is commonly known as the mother of Christian Science. She is one of the most influential authors in terms of the relationship between the mind, body, and spirit. She is known for being a spiritual healer, teacher, and religious reformer. During the time in which she lived, she was a pioneer in terms of challenging traditional religious thought. She confronted mainstream ideas about religion. She introduced the notion of science as an aspect of religion. This very notion alone was enough to upset much of the traditional thinking of her time. The premise that prayer can conquer all things was the center of much of the work and study. Most importantly though was her mindset that prayer heals.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Transcendentalists*⁴⁸

When Ralph Waldo Emerson speaks of religion, he approaches it by looking at the influence of transcendental philosophy on religion. He asserts, "transcendentalism is predicated on the reality of the spiritual or religious element in man; he is inborn capacity to perceive truth and right, so that moral and religious truths can be proved to him with the same degree of certainty that attends mathematical demonstration."⁴⁹

Emerson is asserting here that there is a certain logical basis that's inherent in religion. He is further asserting that many of the aspects of spirituality are inherent in

⁴⁷ Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health*, Christian Science, 1875.

⁴⁸ Emerson, *Transcendentalists*, page 38.

⁴⁹ Ibid., page 38.

each and every person. At the same time he is not dismissing the validity of religion or the Bible or the divinity of the Savior. Rather he is making a strong case for the presence and existence of the Holy Spirit within each and every person alive.

Emerson puts forth some dramatic thinking about the existence of God and the inherent sense of right and justice that exists in all mankind. Some of the examples that he uses are quite simple. At the same time, the examples are challenging. Basing his thinking within humankind as all people having the capacity to discern what is right and what is just he suggests that the test for the existence is inherent in every person.

These tests include: 1. Experience: people find within themselves the capacity to regulate their behavior according to past experiences.

2. People recognize the existence of judgment: there is an awareness that people have when they commit a violation. Emerson suggests that people are aware and conscious of violations committed in not necessarily a function of education or learning.

3. Deprivation causes the cessation of the human experience: in this context MSN is suggesting that in the absence of judgment of that which is just or right, people cease to be human. In the absence of a moral sense to distinguish right from wrong, people are left with an experience that is less than human.

In brief summary, this work by Emerson in speaking about religion, moral judgment, and justice, his stance is that our humanity has built in moral discernment. He further argues that the basis of the ministry of Jesus Christ was that Jesus spoke to these aspects in everyone he encountered. It is Emerson's premise that people are inherently capable of knowing what is morally right and just. The only additional requirement is that

is the aspect of our humanity that is engaged in conversation or called upon for greater expression.

From all of the above, this context contributes greatly to the formation of a healing ministry. This snapshot of the work of Emerson can be easily translated into saying that people are inherently good and we need only appeal to that aspect in them.

CHAPTER 7

EVALUATION / SUMMARIES

The evaluation process took two forms: verbal discussions with group participants and a blind questionnaire consisting of six questions. The group participants were involved in discussions and conversations about negative experiences in a religious context, the effects and the resolutions. The process resulted in all of the participants being able to define for themselves on their own spiritual healing and spiritual fulfillment. This was accomplished for all participants.

There was another unexpected outcome. While healing for disaffected seekers was an objective, the formation of a church for that purpose was an unanticipated outcome. The ultimate evaluation is the answer to a very basic question: Has a church been formed with sensitivities to people with multifaith backgrounds? The answer is a clear yes.

At the same time, there has been a growing following with participants on the inter net. A weekly newsletter has been produced since June of 2009 and this group served as an additional sample population for their reaction to the same considerations. The questions and results follow later in this chapter.

There needs to be several points of information put forth. From the newsletter subscribers, the number of respondents was 56. The survey was blind and the respondents came from the newsletter ministry connected with The Church of Bethlehem. The respondents receive weekly messages from the Sunday Service. It is safe to say that this population is already disposed to receiving a religious or spiritual word and they may not

be considered among those who are not connected. Ironically by virtue of their receipt of the newsletter, that is an indication of their involvement in some type of organized activity.

There are 270 email addresses that received the survey and as noted above, 56 responded. The response rate was about 20%. Respondents were advised at the onset of the survey the purpose of this data collection and had the option to not participate. Eighty eight (88) participants reached that point and as noted, 56 actually participated.

The results of the questionnaire follow in the next section and a brief narrative with comments is included. The results from a Pew Foundation study found that 44 percent of Americans profess a different religious affiliation from the one that they were raised in. This excludes shifts between Protestant denominations, which then brings the number to 28%.⁵⁰

In the attached results it will be noted that there is essentially a shift of 35.7% overall from where participants in this survey began. This does not include changes within the category of Christian. This varies from the approach with the Pew study in that there is no consideration for the Protestant distinction. The movement of people in this survey relative to the context of this project is that these moves were the result of some disappointment in the experience. What is interesting in question one (what was the faith tradition of your development) versus question four (what is the faith tradition that you practice now), there is a decrease in Christianity, an increase in Judaism, an increase in Islam, an increase in both agnosticism, atheism, no participation and other.

Relative to the focus of this project, almost 59% of the participants reported

⁵⁰ Eleanor Clift, "The Quest for a Spiritual Home," *Newsweek*, January 17, 2009.

having had a significant experience of separation or disappointment. With 39% reporting clearly that they had not. There was only 3.5% that reported they were not sure if they had been exposed to such or not. It should be noted that there were just as many written responses as the number of those reporting that they had had a negative experience.

Of the respondents, 51.7% responded that they had resolved whatever the issue was that lead to their disappointment or separation from their particular faith community. What is interesting in the other responses, only 12.5% reported that they had not resolved things. The balance of the respondents it would be safe to say are the same folks who did not have a negative experience to begin with in this sampling.

Finally, only 78.5% of the respondents said that their spiritual needs were actually being met. This is particularly interesting if you consider that almost all of the participants had answers to the next two questions (How would you define spiritual healing and how would you define spiritual / religious fulfillment), it is just curious. If there are answers to the definitions, then what is wrong or missing when the question of having ones needs met not at the same rate?

This clearly requires more work. Upon a closer look, one must reflect on how to address the obvious gap that is the experience of people who can say that they have an answer for their fulfillment and the need isn't being met. It could be speculated that there are some unresolved issues that have yet to be identified and in turn resolved.

TABLE 1

Spiritual Assessment Results

1. What faith tradition did you participate in as part of your development (upbringing)?		
	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Christian	48	85.7%
Jewish	2	3.5%
Muslim	0	0.0%
Atheist	0	0.0%
Agnostic	0	0.0%
No participation	2	3.5%
Other	4	7.1%
No Responses	0	0.0%
Total	56	100%
15 Comment(s)		

2. In your religious experience, have you ever had an experience of significant disappointment, separation or excommunication from a faith community either by your choice or by the authorities of that community?		
	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Yes (please explain below)	33	58.9%
No	22	39.2%
Not sure	2	3.5%
Total	56	100%

3. If you did have an experience of disappointment or separation from a faith community have you resolved that issue?

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Yes	29	51.7%
No	7	12.5%
No Responses	20	35.7%
Total	56	100%

24 Comment(s)

4. What faith tradition do you participate in now?

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Christian	37	66.0%
Jewish	4	7.1%
Muslim	1	1.7%
Atheist	1	1.7%
Agnostic	0	0.0%
No participation	7	12.5%
Other	6	10.7%
No Responses	0	0.0%

Total	56	100%
13 Comment(s)		

5. Are your current spiritual / religious needs being met?

	Number of Response(s)	Response Ratio
Yes	44	78.5%
No	6	10.7%
Not sure	6	10.7%
Total	56	100%
15 Comment(s)		

6. How would you define spiritual healing?

52 Response(s)

7. How would you define spiritual / religious fulfillment?

51 Response(s)

8. Is there anything else you would like to offer?

37 Response(s)

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

There is a clear power struggle-taking place within the walls of many churches, synagogues and mosques across this country. We are no longer in a time when people blindly followed what Father Flannigan the movies said because it was the right thing to do. The nature of clergy today is not held in the same level of esteem as it was not too many years ago.

Through this project and the research it is clear that there is a problem called spiritual abuse and there are ministries that have established counseling specifically for the purpose of healing those impacted by this terrible crime. It is a crime that has yet to rise to the level of being widely known as such. It is a crime that for many years prior to now, there was very little awareness and perhaps no intervention. The absence of interventions is the reason why we are experiencing widespread claims in not only the Catholic Church, but in other areas as well.

We are living in some of the most complicated times in history. While it may have taken hundreds of years for the oral histories to make it to scrolls to make it to books, we now have that same journey of words making it around the world in seconds. To that end we must catch up with interventions against the spiritual abuse of those who are seeking a relationship with their God – whoever that may be for them. These times are radically different and it must be realized that what used to be a parish defined by city

blocks, a walled community or a country hamlet is now defined by web addresses and cyber links. We are no longer isolated from the other. The other is not that far away.

“Pluralism is about the integrity and the encounter of diversity cultural, religious, or political differences, but is the effort to create a society in and out of all these differences.”⁵¹

There is clearly a blurred line between diversity and inclusion. The above quote from Diana Eck of the Pluralism Project speaks to this global challenge. The power dynamic is complicated even further by the need for this culture to be on top or first. In turn that means that our spiritual leaders need to be on top or first. In the final analysis, that only leads to a competitive context that will always result in a victim.

As religious leaders, the call is not to exclude and create more victims, but to include and restrict those things that separate us. That is what Jesus did, that is what Carlton Pearson is attempting and that is what this project and The Church of Bethlehem is all about.

⁵¹ Diana Eck, *American Religious Pluralism: Civic and Theological Discourse, Democracy & The New Religious Pluralism*, edited by Thomas Banchoff, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007

APPENDIX 1

Hermeneutical Self-Inventory⁵²

RELIGIOUS HISTORY AND TRADITION

My early Christian training came from the Baptist Church. At the same time because of daycare needs while my mother worked it was most convenient for me to be cared for during the day at a Catholic nursery school. These two worlds were on a collision course that met their impact point in my mind and experience in my early years.

At the Catholic nursery school, the nuns were not too generous or gracious about the inclusion of other ways of thinking or other doctrines. As a young child I felt so inadequate because I could not see God on the altar as they directed and instructed.

I was more afraid of the things that I could see. I was more fearful of the nuns and the priests in those strange black outfits. The approaches presented by Catholicism actually frightened me. In my Baptist Sunday School lessons, I was taught not to worship any ‘graven images.’ At the Catholic nursery school I was being taught to bow to the statues, pray to their images and even formally bow when I saw a nun in the street. These conflicts were just too much for my young mind to reconcile.

As I got older I became more interested in the Bible and at the same time had a challenge finding knowledgeable adults for objective discussions and to answer questions. There just weren’t any. It was difficult to reconcile what was being taught and gain support for the lessons within the scriptures. I lost my interest, belief, and

⁵² Note: This hermeneutical self-inventory was started in 2007. As a reference for perspective with respect to the location of today relative to this project – the themes are powerfully consistent. These results come from a tool adapted by Dr Lester Ruiz, NYTS.

confidence in people of the clergy. Leadership and solid instruction for my developing curious mind, was just inadequate.

I stopped attending church regularly in high school and did not return for a long while after leaving college. I did return to church services with an organization called Unity. The church that I attended held services in Avery Fisher Hall in New York City. There were several things that totally got my interest and my faith stirred up like nothing before. These were simple things:

- It was a church that didn't have a formal 'membership' process.
- There were literally thousands of people attending these services being held in Avery Fisher Hall.
- There was an expressed intention that people should remain members of their own/home churches.
- If anything, they should consider Unity a supplement to their spiritual foundation or spiritual roots.
- They were clear in the metaphysical teachings that God is here and now and that we all have access to this relationship to cause dramatic life results now, not in the sweet by and by.
- They conducted prayer and meditation on a regular basis which was a totally foreign concept for me. The instructions were simply to be still in that moment and listen to the Christ within.

These elements reflect in a broad way the order of my steps on this path to this point. I started seminary in January of 2002 and have not stopped.

AUTHORITATIVE CRITERIA

The Bible is an essential aspect and element of Unity teaching. Beyond the Bible there are numerous reference sources. In Unity, there are several texts that basically ‘capture’ the essence of the work and the movement. I list here a few of those texts:

Cady, H. Emilie, Lessons in Truth.

Fillmore, Charles, The Metaphysical Bible Dictionary.

Cady, H. Emilie, How I Used Truth.

Charles Fillmore, along with his wife Myrtle, founded the church called Unity. It was never his intention to start a church. His intention was to have prayer groups that demonstrated the healing power of prayer. These groups were to meet regularly with Bible study in the homes of the members.

In many ways that original intention has been lost. In becoming an organized institution (Association of Unity Churches, Unity School of Christianity), it now struggles like most religious franchisors; managing revenues, sustaining infrastructure and sustaining the franchise itself.

3. WORKING THEOLOGY

My goal for ministry is to have the presence of God serve as a bridge among and between people. It is my working theology to have religion come alive in a way that helps in daily life. In this world of today, we are faced with challenges that are not of the typical variety. We are not able to easily manage current life conditions/situations and by default many take on life with a dismissive approach. Our modern lives have become complicated. Our ministries need to be sophisticated enough to deal with these complications.

A theoretical theology may be convenient and not practical. A philosophical theology may sound nice and be intellectually challenging. I am committed to delivering, living and teaching a practical theology that has God be real now, here with all who are able to understand and are open to this approach. Lives will be transformed and God will have a place of expression in these lives.

4. ETHNICITY

I am committed to open religious experiences. When we practice our various religious services every Sunday of the year in this country, it is clearly the most segregated day of the week. That is not practicing the presence of God, nor is it a demonstration of inclusion. We have our own religious houses to get in order before we can minister out in the world.

5. GENDER

I am sensitive to gender issues on a very deep level. My mother's training always had a rather strong intentional message of being especially respectful to women – no matter what their situation or circumstances. The theological teaching of my mother was firm in being a faithful servant regardless of the fact that she was not allowed on the pulpit as a woman in her own church. She was not formally ordained but she delivered ordained messages. Despite the fact she was not permitted on the pulpit of her own church, she did speak at many other churches that allowed for women to share that platform.

When it comes to the interpretation of the text – I learned from my mother that gender doesn't matter. She taught that the really important lesson to learn/teach is the presence of God within. That lesson is from a higher consciousness that she lived and

taught so well – that is also my context. Gender need never rise to the level of taking away from the message of our higher power.

6. SOCIAL CLASS

I was born into a family living in a cold-water flat. At the time in this two-bedroom apartment there were seven people: my parents, my grandparents, my aunt and her daughter and myself. My brother came shortly after and then there were eight. We were poor and we were in church every Sunday.

I don't know of a time in my early family years when church wasn't a part of our lives. It is for that reason that it is difficult to determine the 'influence' of class on my approach to ministry. Class has to be lifted to a level of consideration because during my developmental years, there were no class considerations. There was nothing to consider. So much of my development was inside of the context of the civil rights era that the powerful message of equality was repeated over and over again. Equality lessons translated into a lack of awareness of that distinction between the haves and have-nots.

At the same time, there were no correlations drawn or noted between going to church and family wealth (or lack of wealth). There were the Easter stories about when we didn't have new outfits, but there was always something about going to and being in church that made the difference. It is difficult if not impossible to identify a point in my history that personally ties class to religion or church.

7. EDUCATION

The educational influence on my interpretation of the Sacred Text is easy to discern as it comes from Unity. Apart from my undergraduate degree in psychology and a graduate degree in Public Administration, my most compelling learning with respect to

interpreting the Bible comes from metaphysics. I am in a space of looking not at substantiating or validating the factual content, but rather looking at the intent and the meaning behind the words. What is the higher message / meaning here? What are the words / messages that can empower and inspire people to action? That thinking is the result of my education.

At the same time, there is a disappointment when religious leadership does not reflect a responsible demonstration and possession of basic education. It is simply inexcusable to have stations of religious leadership not reflect an appreciation for education. We are living in times when access to education may not always be equitable it cannot be denied that there is access which must be exploit. Mediocrity, especially with respect to religious education is unacceptable.

8. COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

The needs of urban communities are deep. The ability within urban communities to understand where the problems are and how to articulate these problems is where the difficulty lies. As a society, so many have become so accustomed to losing and assuming the role of victim. This is very clear in many churches where it is almost impossible to see any other stance. So many houses of worship perpetuate this with their members. That was the case for me in the church community of my development.

This influenced my relationship with the Bible and I was lead to seek understanding as to how to break down unclear concepts. For me, there was a need to simplify things so that I could have some understanding and acceptance. The more understanding I gained, the greater distance between my faith community and me. The traditional blind faith under which I was raised was no longer working or acceptable.

9. IMPLICIT POLITICAL STANCE

AND/OR EXPLICIT POLITICAL POSITION

I consider myself non-political and I am aware enough to know that one cannot get off unscathed by the political dynamics operating within any community. The Bible is what it is and our interpretation of the word drives our actions. To be clear, we are not to be driven by the whim of politics. Many associates in the clergy are clear that there are times when it is necessary to go up against City Hall and that is done often. The challenge is picking the right battles at the right time without conceding to those in positions of power and authority. That is the challenge.

10. CUSTOMARY EXPOSURES TO THE SACRED (RELIGIOUS) TEXT

I cannot imagine preaching, praying, or study without the Bible. It not only an essential element of my process, it is the foundational element of spiritual work. The most enjoying aspect of the work is in the interpretations of what some of the scriptures could mean. There is a wealth of possibilities as to what new or different meanings could come out of the work. Much of my personal excitement comes out of newly revealed interpretations and meanings.

11. TRANSLATIONS OF THE SACRED (RELIGIOUS) TEXT

The translation that I use is the New Standard Revised Version. This is the one used most often and when there is a 'traditional' wording of a familiar text, I use the King James Version. So many people are familiar with the King James Version that it is often easier to use it as a reference point and then go into the New Standard Revised Version.

12. PUBLISHED RESOURCES

Daily Word is a tiny publication put out by Unity. It serves as a source of inspiration, but it also serves as a great resource for generating preaching topics and approaches. There is never a time that I pick up Daily Word and fail to gain some benefit.

In addition, the basic source publications by Unity are invaluable. They contain interpretations that take traditional stories and scripture from the Bible and breathe new life into familiar works. The Metaphysical Bible Dictionary is one of the standby sources that I rely upon heavily. There is rarely a time that this source is not part of my preparation.

13. INTENT AND EFFECT OF “PREACHING”

My interpretations are critical to my preaching and teaching. If I am not able to lift people up, and provide people with an experience of inspiration that they didn’t think was available to them prior to the encounter then I have not done my job. The intent of and effect of “preaching” should be to spiritually feed people such that they are left knowing God and know that they are already whole and complete.

Our culture is begging for answers and support with many challenges like same sex marriages, how to protect and support women who are victims of domestic violence or even how to minister to a president who is destroying lives and families in the name of freedom. We are challenged further with how to raise our children in these situations or even how to help them cope as they witness these situations. We have no choice but to prepare these young ones for things we don’t endorse or may not share in our homes or churches. We have to heal.

14. ORIENTATION TO (RELIGIOUS) SCHOLARS AND/OR SCHOLARSHIP.

I have become a skeptic and sometimes cynical with respect to religious education. It is becoming more and more challenging for me to become inspired and moved by the traditional whoop here and a holler over there. This type of presentation in preaching is not scholarship. At the same time, this is not to say that there are some gifted preachers who do use that style. To those, all due respect is extended. Theatricals are not a substitute for a rigorous examination of the literature – regardless of the source. Often, I need to wrestle with the material and the message that is being delivered before arriving at an opinion.

15. FAMILY INFLUENCE

In my childhood home, the King James Version was the Bible that served as the family Bible. There weren't other options. The Bible was the ultimate word and it wasn't something to play with. One of the high points in growing up in my house was getting to the point of getting baptized and then going on to getting your own Bible. That was important.

I can see generational shifts from my grandmother to my mother to me. My grandmother was always reading the Bible. She was a preacher's daughter and you knew that she knew the word. Her interpretations were not always shared in a way that had her go back to the actual verse, but she did have a powerful sense of the intent (as she saw it).

My mother was less accepting and always brought a critical eye. It was not a sense of invalidating the message, but rather not simply accepting things blindly. She had to scrutinize everything. If she took something at face value, it was only for a short

period of time – until she could check other sources. It wasn't until after my mother died and we were going through her books that I discovered how many 'other sources' she actually had. We discovered that she had numerous volumes that explored scripture in a variety of ways. In that process I learned even more about how serious my mother was about her study.

16. LIFE CRISES

There has not been one life crisis situation that didn't have a Bible involved. The effect on my interpretations is that there is no aspect of life that is outside of the consideration of application of scripture from the Bible.

17. HERMENEUTICAL SUSPICION

One of the greatest freedoms offered in the use of metaphysical interpretation of the Bible is the freedom to step away from traditional and potentially detrimental interpretations. There is an inherent inconsistency in interpreting The Bible in a way that brings about doom and gloom. That is not the nature of God that I relate to or practice. The hermeneutical suspicion inherent in my process is that of applying a much more generous dose of compassion and far less hellfire and brimstone.

18. SPIRITUALITY OR DIVINE GUIDANCE

I am clear that I am being divinely guided. There is a clear comfort for me in knowing that to say yes opens doors and paves the way. Now things are not necessarily easy, but it is clear that a way is being formed. There is a difference between spirituality and divine guidance.

There is an ever-present inquiry about where there is a comfort or a tension between the different approach, and I am here to say that my experience has been both comfortable and conflict filled.

Examples:

While I am praising and thanking God about being in this program, I receive a letter from the IRS saying that they want to audit my 2005 return. Here's the irony in that – they specifically want to audit my charitable deductions. Spirituality or divine guidance – I ask you?

While questioning whether or not I'm supposed to be on this path, never mind this program, I woke up one morning, turned on the television while still in bed only to see the movie The Apostle on the TV, without having to change a channel or anything.

[Note: this happens to be one of my favorite movies and I was brought to tears seeing how God answered the question that was on my heart.] Spirituality or divine guidance?

HOW DO I MIX AND PRIORITIZE THE FACTORS

Without question, #15 Family Influence, is the fundamental starting point for me. If it were not for the influence of my mother and the other family dynamics I would not be a preacher today. She is a major part in my fulfilling this dream. This has truly been a lifelong dream just now coming to fruition. In many ways, this is a miracle. I clearly recognize this element as a key element for me. I am not surprised by this and it is not a revelation or epiphany.

The least important to me is probably is #17 Hermeneutical Suspicion. This is more or less an organizing principle as opposed to a critical life indicator for me. This

question of spirituality and divinity are critical life issues and while hermeneutical suspicion may be important, it is not a critical life issue for me.

There are really no surprises here for me. I'm comfortable with the outcome and the inquiry results. This exercise is quite good in terms of structuring an introspective journey.

WHAT NEXT STEPS DO I WANT TO TAKE?

The insights I gained indicate that I would do well to expand my reading and writing in the area of spiritual metaphysics. I'm clear that the next step for me is to produce materials that are easily translated by the masses and in turn would make it possible for so many to discover their own internal divinity. This is not pie in the sky, but rather a reality waiting to be revealed. The language of the absence of God in people's lives is clear in their words. When they are transformed and become new creatures in Christ, their speaking will come from a place within that is centered on that Christ within. The next step for me is to figure out how to bring to light that aspect of divinity residing within each and every one of us.

APPENDIX 2

LEON BAILEY

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E-mail: Leeon@aol.com • Phone: 203-929-7460

April 27, 2009

Reverend Donna Foreman
116 Bartram Avenue
Bridgeport, Connecticut 06605

Dear Donna,

Thank you so much for the meeting yesterday. It provided clarity and conversations that made a difference. I must admit that I was surprised that much of what I wrote and spoke to you about came out in that meeting as a surprise to me. I was never aware of your close affiliation to the Association of Unity Churches as was reflected in that meeting.

I have to apologize for thinking that I thought you had said that you had no use for the AUC. It was my impression that your position was that you enjoyed and fully operated in the autonomy that they afforded and that you were not bound by their judgments. It was out of this misguided impression of mine that I thought we had a potential for partnership and the space to collectively create something. I was mistaken – I'm sorry.

It was my impression that you were not subjecting yourself or the church to the dictates of AUC. On more than one occasion you shared with me how the politics of that body led you to the conclusion that you were better off operating independently and autonomously. I have always been clear about my inability to drop everything and spend two years to become a Unity Minister without providing substantial income for myself. Again, I apologize for my mistaken impression.

I was surprised when none of my calls to you were answered. I was also surprised when none of my notes were answered. I reached out on more than one occasion. I know you are busy and I was seeking partnership and support for you and the church.

You have a gift. You have a presence. I am clear that your contributions are to be honored and acknowledged. I'm also clear that there was too much attention placed on me in the meeting on Sunday. I was attacked (inappropriately and undeservedly) by you.

It would have been nice if we had a conversation prior to Sunday. I would have saved you any number of phone calls to AUC regarding me as I already know all that you shared out of your conversations with Unity Village. That is part of the reason that I proactively voluntarily offered to change the name of the study group. The last thing that I want to do is create confusion for folks. It is good to know that your stance is more aligned with AUC than originally thought. Thank you for that clarity.

In closing Donna, I'm not sure how I can be of service. I offered to be Associate Pastor to assist you and your ministry. You said you would talk to God and your report back was from AUC. You have determined that in your conversations with AUC that it is not allowed. I can be of service in the capacity as member. I'm not sure Donna what it means to be a member. I saw Albert for the first time in years and Peggy is more frequently in attendance, but even with my travels and other engagements I'm not sure what you hold as a working definition of a 'member?' In this past Sunday the definition comes out of convenience rather than presence.

I will never do to you what you did to me this Sunday. I think that the representation of me (even in the context of answering questions presented by members) was probably a conversation worth having with me one-on-one, but your reports in front of the congregation was more like having discovered and uncovered a plot. I have never and would never do that to you. I simply want to protect the church, the Board and you from inadvertent liability. That is what is at stake here. Consciousness is one thing and the business of the world is another. Liabilities in the business end are avoidable. That's why there are checks and balances.

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.

Peace,

Leon Bailey

APPENDIX 3

BETHLEHEM STUDY GROUP

On Being Injured / Wounded – Acknowledging Our Status

Matthew 5:41

If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

What is your sense of this scripture?

If the other person injures, you may forget the injury; but if you injure him you will always remember.

Kahlil Gibran

The person you consider ignorant and insignificant is the one who came from God, that he might learn bliss from grief and knowledge from gloom.

Kahlil Gibran

Work is love made visible. And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy.

Kahlil Gibran

APPENDIX 4

The Bethlehem Group

Being in Community

What is community?

What are some of the communities that you move in and out of in your daily life?

What is the role of your community with respect to your faith?

How we interact within our various communities is a function of our faith.
In other words, our community experience is a function of our faith.

What is the 'value' of your community faith experience?

APPENDIX 5

The Bethlehem Group

Fear and Healing

[Marianne Williamson Quote - "Our Deepest Fear"](#)

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”

What are some of the things that represent fear for you in your life today?

How do these fears impact your experience of life?

What would represent triumph over those fears?

What does spiritual healing mean to you?

APPENDIX 6

Church Bylaws

The Church of Bethlehem

Article 1 – Name, Purpose

The name of the church shall be The Church of Bethlehem. Currently the church is operating out of 317 Meadowbrook Rd, Fairfield, CT 006824. The purpose of this ministry will be to further the experience and exploration of faith in God without consideration of faith tradition or background.

Article 2 – Membership

Section 1 – Members – The members of this church will be comprised of persons who profess a personal faith and believe in God, Jesus Christ and that all people possess the potential to express Christ in how they live their lives. Members will be accepted into membership after a formal written request by them for membership is accepted and approved.

Section 2 – Voting – Every member of the church is entitled to vote at all elections and on all questions submitted to the church in conference, provided the member is present.

Section 3 – Acceptance – a person shall be considered a member upon approval of the church membership in any of the following ways:

1. **By profession of faith.** A person may publicly confess their personal faith in God and the divinity of Jesus Christ.
2. **By letter.** A person from another church may be received into membership upon receipt of a letter of transfer from a church where their membership is currently in good standing.
3. **By statement.** A person may simply give their word that this is ministry that aligns with their values and speaks to their heart. They may be joined into membership.

Section 4 – New Member Orientation – New members will be expected to participate in new member orientation as presented by the church.

Section 5 – Termination of Membership – Membership may be terminated in the following ways: 1) transfer to another church; 2) resignation; 3) lack of participation as a member for more than six months; 4) request to be excluded from the church by the church

Article 3 – Officers and employees

All church officers must be members of the church. The officers of this church shall be as follows:

Board Chairperson

Assistant Chairperson

Secretary / Treasurer

Pastor

Article 4 – Church Employment

When a vacancy occurs a search committee is to be formed by the Officers. The search committee need not be exclusively managed / operated by the Board. The Board search committee shall present recommendations to the church for consideration. The membership shall vote on the recommendation of the search committee.

Article 5 – Church Meetings

Section 1 – Worship Services – The church shall meet regularly each Sunday for services. There will be Wednesday evening prayer and study meetings.

Section 2 – Special Services – Special services will be conducted for holidays (Christmas, Easter and Good Friday).

Section 3 – Business Meetings – Business meetings will be conducted on a monthly basis. These meetings will be open to the membership and run by the Board Chairperson. Special business meetings can be called on an as needed basis to address matters of significant importance.

Section 4 – Quorum – A quorum consists of those who attend the business meeting.

Section 5 – Parliamentary Procedures – The most current edition of Robert's Rules of Order shall be the authority for parliamentary rules of procedure for all business meetings of the church.

Article 6 – Committees

As needed and called for, the church shall form committees to address specific agreed upon needs as acts of service to the community.

Article 7 – Amendments

Section 1 – The Bylaws may be amended when necessary by a majority vote of those in attendance at a business meeting.

Article 8 – Dissolution Clause

In the event of dissolution of the organization, assets shall be distributed for religious purposes to a like-minded organization that is dedicated to the spiritual growth of all people.

APPENDIX 7

Project Proposal

INTRODUCTION TO THE SETTING

There are a great number of people who are disaffected from their various faith tradition experiences. In current events, there are regular reports of victims of clergy misconduct and spiritual abuse. The nature of these stories range from financial inappropriateness to sexual molestation. The impact of such activities has left great numbers of people harmed, wounded, disillusioned and honestly not ready or willing to return to a religious experience.

Unfortunately, there is no one religious community that is separate and apart from this experience. While the more dramatic and horrific stories make the headlines, those who have been spiritually or emotionally wounded may remain unknown. According to the Pew Research, more than 28% of adult Americans have left the religion of their upbringing, and looking strictly at Protestantism, 'roughly 44% of adults have either switched religious affiliation,' or stopped associating with a religious practice at all. These are numbers that have been tracked by a very reliable entity, however there are far greater numbers that go quietly unreported.

This project grows out of an expressed need. Members of a small, failing church in Bridgeport, Connecticut, found that the religious experience in that church was not fulfilling. There was in fact a reported experience of spiritual abuse. Spiritual abuse as defined by David Henke is 'the misuse of a position of power, leadership, or influence to further the selfish interests of someone other than the individual who needs help.' This

was the case for many who were a part of that small ministry. Their challenge was more than just personal survival and the viability of their spiritual selves in the face of a dominating and controlling leader. The passive aggressive nature of the leader would have new visitors come only once never to be seen again.

These conditions are illustrative of not simply this setting, but so many other settings where people become disaffected as the result of being impacted negatively through their religious experience. This is how souls become wounded and the very organizations that have been established for healing become the vehicles for the delivery of harm.

CHALLENGE STATEMENT

As spiritual leader for a small group of disenfranchised persons of faith, I have the distinct honor of forming a circle intended to heal, serve and nurture wounded souls in Fairfield County, Connecticut. The values of those believers coming from various faith traditions is that their belief in God can be served free of fear and denigration. My challenge is to establish a church that will deliver a service that is safe and provides spiritual fulfillment regardless of prior faith practice, tradition or pre-disposition.

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGE

Bridgeport Unity Church is affiliated with The Association of Unity Churches of Christianity. The Association of Unity Churches sponsors and supports Unity Churches all over the world. This movement comes out of what is called the New Thought movement started by Charles and Myrtle Fillmore in the late 1800's. This church started at the same time as others of this type including Science of Mind and Divine Mind.

Much of the challenge lies in the sanctioning bodies and the way in which these churches are viewed in comparison with traditional 'mainstream' denominations.

Other challenges that are inherent in this process are related to the absence of strict standards for sanctioning or deregulating clergy in these movements. While many other faith disciplines have sanctioning bodies of authority where the hierarchy literally dictates the scope of operations in each of the units, that type of formality is missing from the system of Unity Churches that the Bridgeport Unity Church is a member.

There is a demand from the community of disaffected seekers to be served and to have a religious experience that accomplishes several things. There is a desire to put closure to the prior experience encountered in the Bridgeport Unity Church. There is a desire to establish an alternative religious process, and finally there is also a desire to build a religious foundation for children who have not been exposed to a positive religious experience so that they may grow into having a fulfilling religious life.

PLAN OF IMPLEMENTATION

Goal 1: Explore the nature of healing with respect to disaffected seekers who have been negatively impacted by their religious experiences.

Strategy 1.

Convene a group of Fairfield County residents who have been negatively impacted by a religious experience and discuss the impacts.

Evaluation criteria for strategy 1:

Conduct at least two meetings to discuss the experiences of those gathered and the impacts they've encountered. This will take place during March of 2009.

Strategy 2.

Convene a group of Fairfield County residents to explore the experience of and the nature of healing.

Evaluation criteria for strategy 2:

At least two meetings will be conducted with residents to discuss what their personal healing experience could be and what it would be like to be healed. This will take place during April, 2009.

Strategy 3.

Clarify the nature of spiritual hurt or wounds found in disaffected seekers.

Evaluation criteria for strategy 3:

At least two meetings will be conducted with these groups where the participants will share the aspects of their particular situations. They will then share in a group their personal stories.

Goal 2: Convene seekers who represent the religious diversity of the community and explore views on spiritual healing.

Strategy 1:

Develop a method of assessing wounded seekers.

Evaluation criteria for strategy 1:

Wounded seekers will share their experiences with each other and have an opportunity to determine a means for resolving their situations.

Strategy 2:

Develop a meeting schedule for meeting with wounded seekers.

Evaluation criteria of strategy 2:

Conduct meetings with seekers to have assurances that they are on the path to healing. These meetings will be conducted from May, 2009 through July, 2009.

Strategy 3:

Conduct the meetings that were outlined in strategy 2 and deliver the healing messages and processes.

Evaluation criteria for strategy 3:

Seekers will meet and begin their personal process of healing. They will clear any of the past baggage that has impacted them prior to their experience with this process (July - August, 2009).

Goal 3:

Develop and deliver a church that outlines steps toward embracing and healing wounded seekers.

Strategy 1:

Develop a mission statement for the church that reflects a commitment to healing and spiritual growth.

Evaluation criteria for strategy 1:

The mission statement will be easy to comprehend and reflect sentiments and growth of the participants in this newly formed church.

Strategy 2:

Identify a group of church leaders who will assume the roles of President, Vice President, and Secretary / Treasurer.

Evaluation criteria for strategy 2:

Church leadership will be formed and business meetings will take place.

Strategy 3:

Complete and file the appropriate governmental paper work required to form a church.

Evaluation of strategy 3:

A church will be named, formed and operational in Fairfield County, Connecticut. This should be completed by November 2009.

According to the “Father of Taoism,” Lao Tzu, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a meal. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” In this case, teaching how to “heal” as a core element of the functioning of this ministry is creating a healing space for a time to come. It is out of current need and a vision for future generations is the basis for building this ministry.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Biblical:

What sacred texts lend insight / instruction to the nature of healing and recovery?

How can the sacred texts of the Unity Church be applied to the formation of a new community?

Theological:

What are sources of Unity ecclesiology? How are they relevant to this new community?

What other ecclesiology's might be relevant to the formation of this new community?

Socio/psychological:

What insights can be gleaned from the current literature on abuse / recovery in the formation of a new community?

What socio/psychological resources are available that would prevent the pattern of abuse that often develops in religious communities?

EVALUATION PROCESS

The evaluation process will involve surveys and questionnaires that gather information about various experiences. The resulting information will be quite informative and powerfully illustrative of the impact of these dynamics across various faith traditions.

MINISTERIAL COMPETENCIES

Ability as multifaith leader

A leader is one who creates an environment in which a variety of gifts may flourish. She or he is effective in empowering others to realize their own calling or gifts, and facilitates opportunities in which others can flourish. Such a person is characterized by a willingness to listen and respond, the capacity to take the initiative when appropriate, the ability to delegate responsibility to capable people, and the sensitivity to share resources.

Ecumenist

“Ecumenical” comes from the Greek word meaning the entire inhabited world. An ecumenist is one who ministers effectively in a global context, pays attention to the unity of the whole human race while attending to the mission of one’s own faith tradition, encourages interfaith dialogue and understanding, and seeks to engage in activities that promote the peace or well-being of the city.

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